

The Development of Communication Skills through Recognition and Production of Sounds in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper describes several issues on developing foreign language learners' communication skills by teaching pronunciation in a classroom situation. It discusses the status of Oral Communication classes taught in Japanese high schools and how speaking and pronunciation are treated in it. It presents an example of a pronunciation lesson to promote foreign language learner's better understanding of the English sound system. It includes class description, pronunciation problems, goals, inductive generalization, recognition practice, production practice, and communicative practice.

Oral Communication in a Foreign Language

In the traditional Grammar-Translation Method of teaching English in Japan, writing and reading are the main concern and the importance of speaking and listening is often underrated or even ignored by language teachers. However, in recent years, the ability to speak and understand a foreign language in the actual communication has increasingly become necessary due to globalization and the rapid development of the transportation and communication systems worldwide. This trend has had great influence on the field of foreign language teaching in Japan. Introducing English as a foreign language into public elementary schools and inviting more AET's (assistant English teachers), who are native speakers of English, to public junior high and high schools are a few good examples of the changes in that field. Much research has been done in the above vital issues (e.g., Miyata 1997, Lundmark 1998, Koizumi 1999). These trends are clearly reflected in the new version of the curriculum requirements provided by the Ministry of Education of Japan, in which more stress is laid on listening and speaking in English. The introduction of mandatory Oral Communication in Japanese high schools will probably, more than ever before, increase the attention and enthusiasm of both teachers and students toward acquiring oral communication skills.

Recently, more and more Japanese public universities and colleges are trying to adopt listening comprehension tests in their entrance examinations. Listening is an important skill to

acquire in foreign language classes and to be applied in “real life” communication. In fact, in Oral Communication, which started in 1994 as a required subject in Japanese high schools, listening comprehension is far more emphasized than speaking. Oral Communication is divided into three separate courses; everyday English is supposed to be taught in Oral Communication A, listening comprehension in Oral Communication B, and debates and discussions in Oral Communication C. A research study by Kitamura and Takeuchi (1998) shows that 20% of all the first year students they surveyed were taught in Oral Communication A, 73% in Oral Communication B, and only 7% in Oral Communication C, 36% of the second year students were taught in Oral Communication A, 42% in Oral Communication B, and 22% in Oral Communication C, and 9% of all the third year students were taught in Oral Communication A, 60% in Oral Communication B, and 31% in Oral Communication C. Matsumoto (1997) also claims that Oral Communication C has not been held in a number of high schools for the reasons that many teaching materials have not been sufficiently developed, and that Japanese English teachers do not take up a positive attitude toward teaching that particular course. Katano (1999) contends that the entrance examination system in Japan can also prevent many high school students from gaining motivation, whether it is integrative or instrumental, in pseudo-communicative practice or authentic communication, for examinees are not asked to answer the questions either orally or aurally in many of the entrance examinations that they take.

The way Pronunciation is Treated in the EFL Situation in Japan

As mentioned above, the Japanese high school curriculum has traditionally placed limited importance on oral communication skills. This also holds true for English pronunciation skills. Though pronunciation is not the most important factor in oral communication, it is a very significant part of communication, especially when conversations take place in a foreign language. Pronunciation that is close to that of the native speaker may not be necessary, but the learner’s pronunciation needs to be good enough so that the meanings he or she wants to convey may not be misunderstood by the addressee during a conversation. It is true that there exists a difficult issue of error treatment in teaching pronunciation, that is “too much negative cognitive feedback — a barrage of interruptions, corrections, and overt attention to malformations — often leads learners to shut off their attempts at communication,” as Brown (1994) says citing Vigil and Oller’s (1976) model. However, it is necessary that the teacher try out some pronunciation lessons which he or

she thinks could be valid and effective for the learner.

In English classes in Japan, pronunciation is not usually emphasized partly because it is somewhat difficult to evaluate pronunciation skills especially in written tests. Even if it is taught in class, the instruction is often conducted only through the “same or different” exercises. The worst part of the instruction is that it is not done orally by the learners. The teacher sometimes becomes a model and usually explains the difference between two sounds in terms of the shape of the tongue and lips and the position of the tongue but seldom asks students to pronounce the words in class. Unfortunately it is a fact that there are teachers who do not pronounce words correctly even though they know how the sounds should be produced. For example, they explain to their students the difference in sounds between [dʒ] as in “major” and [ʒ] as in “measure,” but they do not produce the sounds in order to show them the difference. Also, both the teachers and students know that there are so many things to cover in a limited period of time, and students are well aware that many of these things are not asked in their entrance examination anyway, which is their achievement goal for the moment. In that sense, many Japanese students may have little motivation for learning pronunciation and many teachers may also lose motivation for teaching it.

However, after students pass their examinations and enter a college, many of them learn the necessity of intercultural communication and feel for the first time that it is important not only to know the difference but also to be able to actually produce sounds. This is because many of these students are, for the first time, exposed to spoken English and/or English of native speakers. It would be of benefit if the teacher could often give his or her students pronunciation lessons in junior high and high schools. It is encouraging for students if they know they can produce and recognize at least some of the sounds difficult for them. It is very frustrating if they know the difference but cannot produce or recognize them. The teacher may need to let his or her students know how wonderful it is to be able to distinguish sounds orally and aurally in order to communicate before they become really tired of difficult sounds of English because of all those tedious simple mechanical exercises. The next section raises an example of a pronunciation lesson for EFL classes in Japan.

Pronunciation Lesson

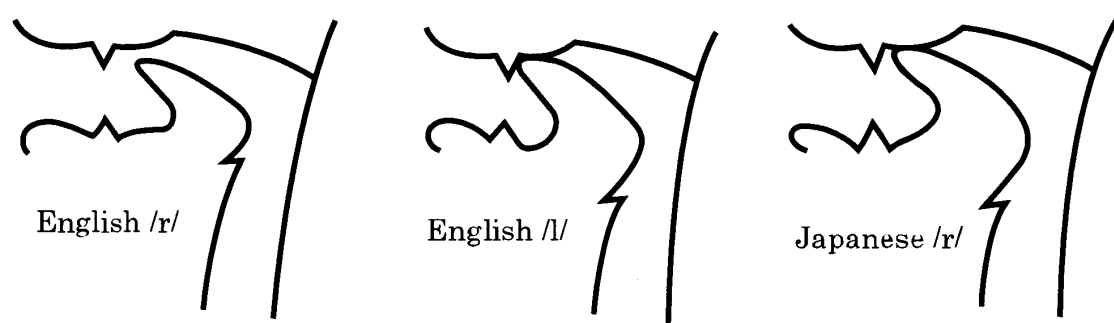
Class Description

Class is held at a public high school in Sasebo, a city in a southern part of Japan. Students

attend English classes for a total of two hours a day, five days a week. twenty Japanese students attend this class, all of whom are the twelfth graders (the third year students in high school). They are seventeen to eighteen years of age. Twelve of them are male and eight of them are female. They have already learned English for five years through the Grammar-Translation Method, so most of them can read and write English and control English grammar fairly well. However, not only because all the instruction in their previous English classes in junior high and high schools was offered with little focus on pronunciation by teachers who were native speakers of Japanese who themselves had not been really trained in pronouncing proper sounds of the English language but also because they had little opportunity to come into contact with native speakers of English and were not often exposed to spoken English, the students still have difficulty in both recognizing and producing English sounds which do not exist in the sound system of the Japanese language. None of them have background in other foreign languages. They have already learned the phonetic alphabet. This lesson should begin thirty minutes prior to the end of the class.

Pronunciation Problem

Japanese speakers have difficulty recognizing and producing the phoneme /r/ (voiced, alveolar, approximant) and commonly substitute /l/ (voiced, alveolar, lateral) for /r/. A main cause of this substitution is that the phoneme /r/ does not exist in the sound system of the Japanese language, and that the phoneme /l/ is very similar to the Japanese phoneme /r/ (voiced, palato-alveolar, lateral). The hardest thing for the Japanese to do when they try to pronounce the English phoneme /r/ is avoiding tongue contact with the alveolar ridge, for their tongue always touches the hard palate when they pronounce the Japanese phoneme /r/.



Materials Already Taught

In the previous pronunciation lesson, the students learned the distinction between /ɪ/ (mid-high, front) and /i:/ (high, front) and between /s/ (voiceless, alveolar, fricative) and /θ/ (voiceless, dental, fricative). The format of exercises and drills in this lesson will be familiar to the students.

Goals

80% of the students will be able to not only recognize the distinction between /l/ and /r/ but also produce /r/ appropriately at the syllable-initial position. (Even though the English phoneme /l/ is very close to the Japanese /r/, a slight correction may be necessary for some of the students.)

Introduction / Context

The teacher will begin the class by telling the students a short story. This will be a brief listening exercise for the students. In the following scenario T stands for “Teacher” and Ss stands for “Students.”

T: Now, We’re going to do some listening. I’m going to tell you a story about a friend of mine who works in the countryside. I’m going to ask you a few questions about the story later, so listen carefully. O.K.?

I have a friend whose name is Takeshi. He is 45 years old and lives in a rural area in Saga Prefecture with his wife and two children. He is a farmer and makes his living selling vegetables he grows on his farm. He likes the life in the country and is very proud of his work. He drives his truck to town every morning to sell his vegetables at a market. It usually takes him about an hour to get to the market, but when it rains, the road becomes so muddy he had to drive slowly. He usually leaves his farm at six in the morning and comes back at around noon. One day, he had a serious problem on the way to the market. It was a rainy day, and his truck was carrying such a heavy load of vegetables that it got stuck in the mud. He waited in the rain for two hours until another car came by and the driver helped him. He got to the market too late on the day and couldn’t sell any of his vegetables.

T: Did you get it? O.K. Here are some questions about the story. What is Takeshi’s job?

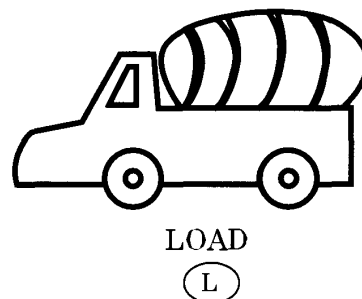
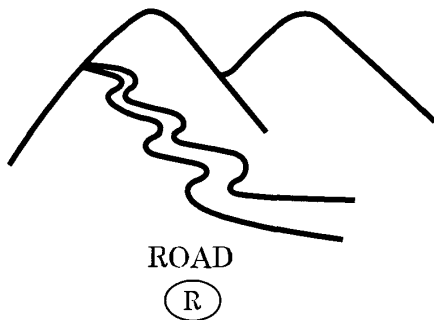
Ss: A farmer.

T: Good. How old is Takeshi?

Ss: 45 years old.

T: O.K. Who does he live with?

- Ss: With his wife and two children.
- T: Good. Where does he go in a truck every morning?
- Ss: A market in town.
- T: Good. What does he go to the market every morning for?
- Ss: He has to sell vegetables.
- T: O.K. Why does he drive slowly on a rainy day.
- Ss: Because the road becomes muddy.
- T: Great. (The teacher draws a picture of a road on the board and writes the word "ROAD" under the picture.)
The last question. Why did his truck get stuck in the mud?
- Ss: Because the road was muddy.
- T: That's right. Can you think of any other reason?
- Ss: Because the truck was carrying a heavy load.
- T: Good. (The teacher draws a picture of a truck with a load on and writes the word "LOAD" under the picture.) (T may hand out copies of the story to each student after he asked these questions and ask them if they have any questions about the content in the story.)
(It will take the teacher only a few seconds to draw the pictures. The students may enjoy watching the teacher actually draw pictures on the board. The teacher may also bring photos or draw pictures on two separate sheets of paper before class.)



Attention Pointer

The teacher uses the pictures drawn on the board.

- T: Look at the two pictures I drew on the board. Listen carefully to the first sounds of these words.
- T: road (T points to the picture on the board.)
road (T writes "R" under the word "ROAD.")

load (T points to the picture on the board.)
load (T writes "L" under the word "LOAD.")

Now, please repeat after me.

road (T points to the picture on the board.)	Ss:	road
road (T points to the picture on the board.)	Ss:	road
load (T points to the picture on the board.)	Ss:	load
load (T points to the picture on the board.)	Ss:	load

road – load (T points to the picture on the board as spoken.)

Ss: road – load

T: road – load (T points to the picture on the board as spoken.)

Ss: road – load

T: road – load (T points to the picture on the board as spoken.)

Ss: road – load

Inductive Generalization

T: Now, I want you to think of the shape of your tongue and lips when you pronounce the first sounds of these two words.

Say "road." (T points to the picture on the board.)

Ss: road

T: Does your tongue touch the upper gum?

Ss: No.

T: Right. Now, say "load." (T points to the picture on the board.)

Ss: load

T: Does your tongue touch the upper gum or near the back of your upper teeth?

Ss: Yes.

T: Right. What about your lips? Say "road." (T points to the picture on the board.)

Ss: road

T: Are your lips rounded when you pronounce the first sound of the word?

Ss: Yes.

T: Good. Now, say "load." (T points to the picture on the board.)

Ss: load

T: Are your lips rounded when you pronounce the first sound of the word?

Ss: No.

Recognition Practice

A. Same – Different Drill

T: Now, I'm going to say two words. And tell me if the sounds are the same or different. If you think the sounds are the same, you say "same," and if you think the sounds are different, you "different." O.K.? For example, if I say "road – road," you say, "same." Got it?

T:	road – road	Ss:	Same.
T:	load – load	Ss:	Same.
T:	road – load	Ss:	Different
T:	load – road	Ss:	Different
T:	rock – lock	Ss:	Different
T:	reader – leader	Ss:	Different
T:	raw – law (T calls on individuals)	S1:	Different
T:	lift – lift	S2:	Same.
T:	rack – rack	S3:	Same.
T:	light – right	S4:	Different

B. Comprehension Drill

T: Now, I'll say two sentence. One of them has a word incorrectly pronounce. You tell me which sentence has all the words correctly pronounced. For example, if I say, "He is reading a book." – He is leading a book," you say "one" because the first sentence has the word correctly pronounced. If you think the second sentence is correct, you say "two." O.K.?

T:	Write a letter to me. – Light a letter to me.
Ss:	One.
T:	How wrong is this bridge? – How long is this bridge?
Ss:	Two.
T:	How rucky I am. – How lucky I am.
Ss:	Two.
T:	This dining loom is pretty. – This dining room is pretty. (T calls on individuals)
S5:	two
T:	Do you remember my name? – Do you lemember my name?
S6:	one
T:	There is a parking lot over there. – There is a parking rot over there.
S7:	one
T:	She raughed at me. – She laughed at me.
S8:	two

C. Pseudo-Communicative Drill

T: O.K. Now, if I say, "There is a road." You say, "in the mountain." And if I say, "There is a load," you say, "on the truck." O.K.? Let's try it together.

T:	There is a road. (no pointing)	Ss:	In the mountain.
T:	There is a load. (no pointing)	Ss:	On the truck.
T:	There is a load. (T calls on individual.)	S9:	On the truck.
T:	There is a road.	S10:	In the mountain.
T:	There is a road.	S11:	In the mountain.
T:	There is a road.	S12:	In the mountain.
T:	There is a load.	S13:	On the truck.
T:	All together now.		
T:	There is a load.	Ss:	On the truck.
T:	There is a road.	Ss:	In the mountain.

Production Practice

A. Repetition of Minimal Pairs

T:	Everyone, please repeat after me.		
T:	road – load	Ss:	road – load
T:	read – lead	Ss:	read – lead
T:	right – light	Ss:	right – light
T:	rock – lock (T calls on individuals.)	S14:	rock – lock
T:	wrong – long	S15:	wrong – long
T:	ram – lamb	S16:	ram – lamb
T:	rake – lake	S17:	rake – lake
T:	rift – lift	S18:	rift – lift
T:	Good!		

B. Opposites Drill

T: If I say "road," you say, "load," (T indicates the pictures and words on the board.) and if I say, "load," you say "road." (T indicates the pictures and words on the board.)
Let's try once.

T: road (T indicates the picture and the word.)

Ss: load

T: Good. O.K. Here we go.

T:	load	Ss:	road
T:	road	Ss:	load
T:	ramp	Ss:	lamp
T:	light (T calls on individuals.)	S19:	right
T:	lift	S20:	rift
T:	rid	S1:	lid

T:	liver	S2:	river
T:	lice	S3:	rice
T:	rip	S4:	lip
T:	Good!		

C. Practice in Sentence

T: Let's do a little more practice in sentences. Please repeat after me.

T:	road	Ss:	road
T:	I drove on the road.	Ss:	I drove on the road.
T:	river	Ss:	river
T:	I swam in the river.	Ss:	I swam in the river.
T:	lock	Ss:	lock
T:	He locked the door.	Ss:	He locked the door.
T:	rice (T calls on individuals.)	S5:	rice
T:	We eat rice.	S5:	We eat rice.
T:	read	S6:	read
T:	I read books.	S6:	I read books.
T:	litter	S7:	litter
T:	Don't litter the garden.	S7:	Don't litter the garden.
T:	lunch	S8:	lunch
T:	I had a good lunch.	S8:	I had a good lunch.
T:	reserve	S9:	reserve
T:	I reserved a table.	S9:	I reserved a table.

T: Great!

Dialogue

T: Now, let's practice a dialogue. (T passes out a copy of the following dialogue to the students.)

Ken: How did you *like* the *rock 'n' roll* concert?
 Mary: It was *really* good. I *liked* it a *lot*.
 Ken: The *leader* of the band is now very famous.
 Mary: That's *right*. He *recently received* an honor from the queen.
 Ken: I *read* in the newspaper that the band is on the *road*.
 Mary: *Right*. After this concert, they'll visit *Russia, London, Rome, and Liverpool*, the home of the Beatles.

T: Please repeat after me.

T: (T reads each line of the dialogue.) Ss: (Ss repeat after T.)

T: Good. This time I'll be Ken, and you'll be Mary. O.K.?

T: (T reads Ken's lines.) Ss: (Ss reply with Mary's lines.)

- T: Good. Now, you'll be Ken, and I'll be Mary.
- Ss: (Ss read Ken's lines.) T: (T replies with Mary's lines.)
- T: Good. Now, find a partner and work on the dialogue. Every time you go through the dialogue, switch parts, O.K.? I'll give you a few minutes, so try as many times as you can. (The teacher walks to each group and listen. If they need help, help them in any way, or let their partners help.)

Communicative Practice

The teacher passes out a copy of a street map to every student. *(See the appendix.)

- T: You can see there are nine places or buildings on the map. I'm going to ask you which street those places are on. So tell me the name of the street? For example, if I ask, "Where is the library?" you say "It's on Red Street." O.K.?
- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| T: Where is the restaurant ? | Ss: It's on Lake Street. |
| T: Where is the record shop? | Ss: It's on Rabbit Lane . |
| T: Where is the luggage store? | Ss: It's on Rich Street. |
| T: Where is the railroad station? | Ss: It's on Roof Street. |
| T: Where is the liquor store? | Ss: It's on Rubber Street. |
| T: Where is the lawyer's office? | Ss: It's on Lonely Street. |
| T: Where is the radio station? | Ss: It's on Long Street. |
| T: Where is the real estate agency? | Ss: It's on Liberty Street. |
| T: Where is the library ? | Ss: It's on Red Street. |
- T: Good!
- T: Now, we are going to ask each other for directions. I need a volunteer. (The teacher chooses a student.) Let's suppose we are at the restaurant. Remember how to ask people for directions? (The previous work has given the students some knowledge of how to ask for directions and how to answer it.) Let's try. O.K. You start.
- S1: Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get to the **railroad** station?
- T: Yes. I think so. Uh... Go down this street until you hit **Roof** Street and turn to the **left** and go two blocks down. If you cross **Red** Street, You'll see the **railroad** station on your **right**.
- S1: I see. Thank you very much.
- T: You are welcome.
- T: O.K. Now, find your partner and ask each other for directions. You take turns. Suppose you are at the railroad station. If your partner asks you how to get to, for example, the luggage store, then, you this time ask your partner how to get to some place from the luggage store, O.K.? Let's start. (The students are not yet able to engage in extended conversations in English. Therefore, at this time, especially when they are learning sounds which are difficult for them to pronounce, it may be more effective for them to try out relatively short conversations.)

Homework

Give the students lists of minimal pairs and sentences that have words which contain /l/ and /r/. Tell them to concentrate on the shape of their tongue and lips when they pronounce /l/ and /r/ and review them at home. In the next class the students will have a small recognition and production test such as writing “same” or “different” on the answer sheet (or it can be done orally) and producing the sentences orally.

Contingency Plan

If the pronunciation exercises take less time than expected, review the minimal pairs and sentences for the next small test. Also, the communicative portion of the lesson can take up the remainder of the class time.

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Appendix

